

## ***Fuzzy Logic: "I know it when I see it" and other hazards for artists***

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I'm currently teaching a class at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago called "In a Plain Brown Wrapper." I love this title, first of all because only about half the students knew what it referenced, and secondly, it did exactly what the original intent of the phrase was supposed to do – obscure porn and put it in an acceptable public package.

As I was prepping for the class, I had a realization about pornography - it is the imaginary cultural standard by which all sexual imagery is measured. I say imaginary because neither feminists nor the Supreme Court have been able to create an unambiguous and stable definition that can be applied when visual or literary material is called into question. The art world is no exception - porn is the framing device through which representations of the body and its variable genders and sexualities are determined to be either offensive or not. Even if curators in galleries, museums, and other art spaces would never personally call a work of art pornography, fear that work might be defamed as pornographic, or worse, obscene, is reason enough for the faint of heart among them to avoid showing certain kinds of work. There are few greater intellectual insults or vilifying descriptors than to call something pornographic. It's the easiest slur. It immediately stigmatizes its object.

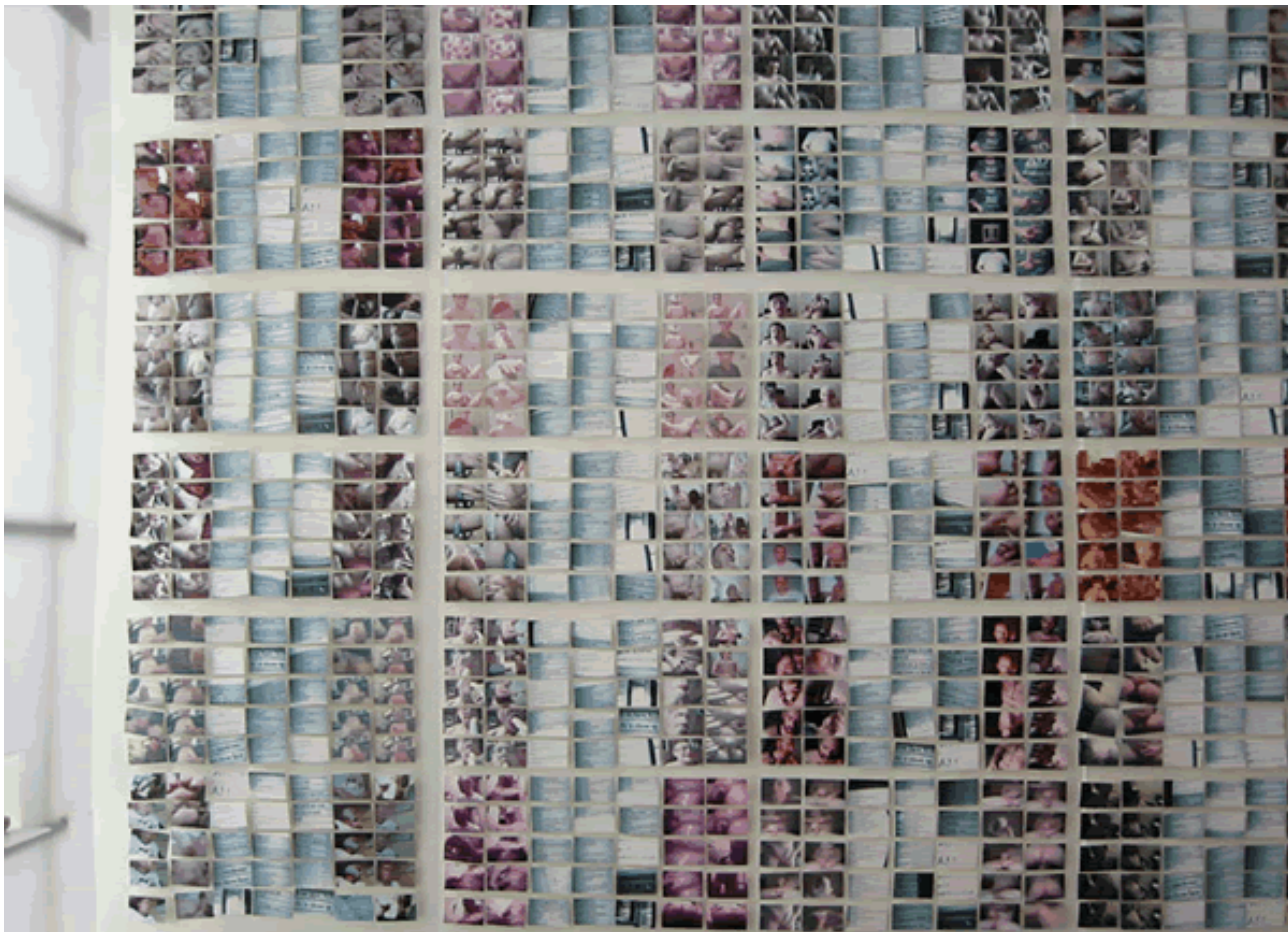
But let me move on to the subject of the panel - cybersex and what art's got to do with it. I guess I would say art has no direct connection to cyber sex; however artists do. I suspect a good number engage in it, and a much smaller number make work using either what they find and appropriate, or what they make happen in cyberspace.

I'm presenting the work of three artists, two of whom are alums of SAIC and one a current student. Each one has been questioned in and out of the classroom about his work's morality, exploitative nature, pornographic content, and questionable legality. As I studied the work deciding how I would frame it for this panel, I had another revelation – if I were to see any of the images or video in their original context on the Internet, I would not, in any way, consider any of them as art. However, as soon as

artist puts these same images into an art context and draws attention to the specific issues they want to address, every image and video becomes absolutely fascinating and loaded with significance that could be pondered endlessly from a psychological, pop cultural, sociological, or an any of many other intellectual perspectives.

**Isaac Leung – *The Impossibility of Having Sex with 500 Men in a Month - I’m an Oriental Whore***

As the title suggests, for one month Isaac Leung attempted to have sex with as many men as possible on the Internet using a web cam. The final count was only 161, but that’s still an average of 5.4 men per day, and he says there was one day when he did 20 guys.



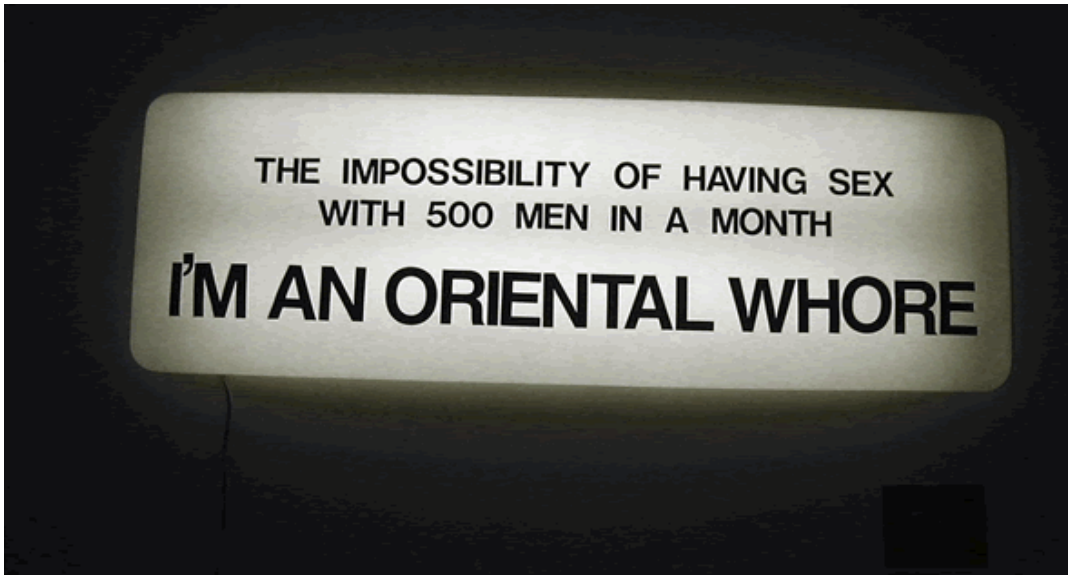
From the encounter with each man, he saved screen captures of their one-handed chats, and presented hundreds of the explicit photos in an installation that also included pie charts for age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and sexual position

preferred, as well as the transcripts of their chat sessions, and a personal journal he kept to record his daily response to the project.



Leung fucked men from forty-two cities and sixteen countries, all of whom were led to believe he was an eighteen year old Japanese boy.

As a Chinese man, Leung's identity as Japanese and his use of the politically and culturally offensive "oriental whore" problematizes race, gender, gay promiscuity, and safe sex. He used the lure of what he calls his "Oriental features" to seduce web cam partners, capturing still images and video clips of them while they were masturbating and without their knowledge or consent. Of course this brings up both ethical and legal questions about privacy, consent, responsibility, and whether in fact, the Internet is a public domain. It was for the lack of answers to these very questions that he was not allowed to present his installation as it was intended to be seen for his BFA exhibition at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Rather than de-installing the piece, he covered the entrance to his installation space with paper so that all that was visible was a large lighted sign with the full title.



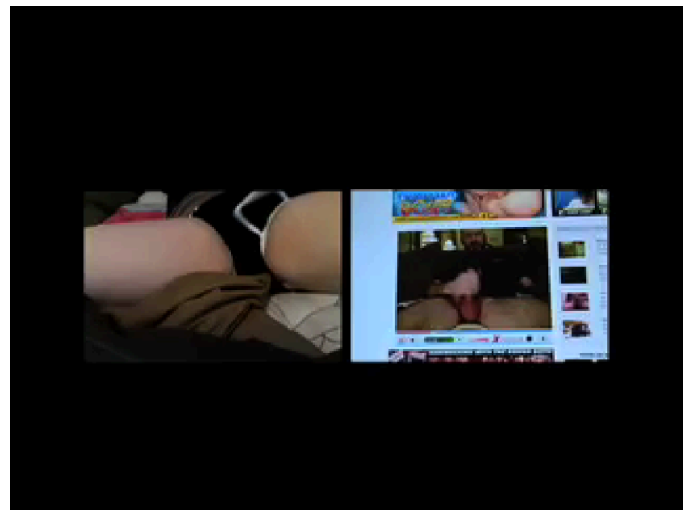
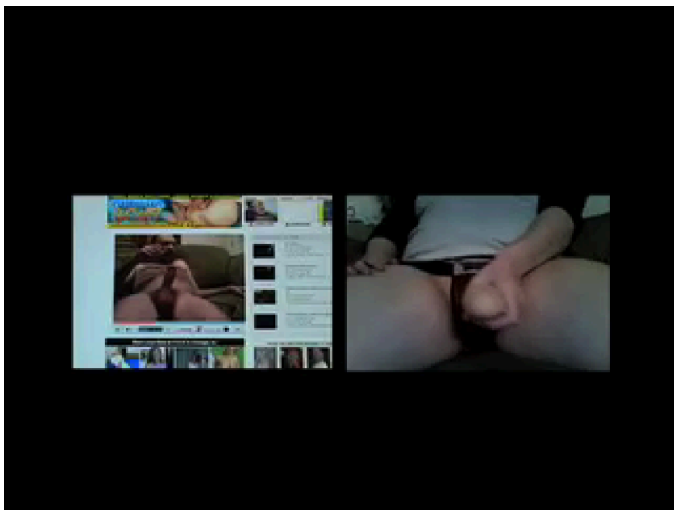
Leung plays with that dubious line between art and porn, normalcy and deviance. In a statement that appeared in a web site reincarnation and documentation of the piece he says:

The project documents the collective experience of orgasm in the virtual space. It pushes the limit of exhibitionistic behavior in a telepresence culture. It questions whether sex is virtual or real, whether space is private or public... It creates a discourse of sexual politics in the context of post-colonial and interracial sexual relationships by showing my "oriental" identity through my web camera."



## **Kean O'Brien – *JERK OFF***

Kean O'Brien is a male-identified, female-bodied person who claims a transgendered identity, is just beginning to take testosterone, and is still pre-op in regard to upper body surgery. Being male-identified, and in a transitional stage of both his sexual and gendered selfhood, he is grappling with what it means theoretically to be a man and to have the organ that is part, but only part, of manhood. He talks about the desire to both emotionally and physically know what it feels like to jerk off.



In order to gather information to comprehend this, O'Brien uses gay chat sites and video archives of men masturbating to a supposed younger male viewer whom they all call "boy." In the role he assumes, the individual men are the daddy and he is the boy. In the first video, he mimics the movements of the daddy, learning the way in which men touch themselves and handle their cocks. This fulfills a visual and emotional claim to the organ. In the second video, there is an acknowledgement that the desire for the strapped-on organ to be real is not enough to satisfy the physiological mechanism needed for orgasm. In this clip, the organ has been removed. O'Brien masturbates with clitoral stimulation to the urging of daddy, and then on cue, comes at daddy's command.

So now we have an example of an artist actually making porn. O'Brien was also challenged, like Leung, when his BFA exhibition was installed. He had made a video in

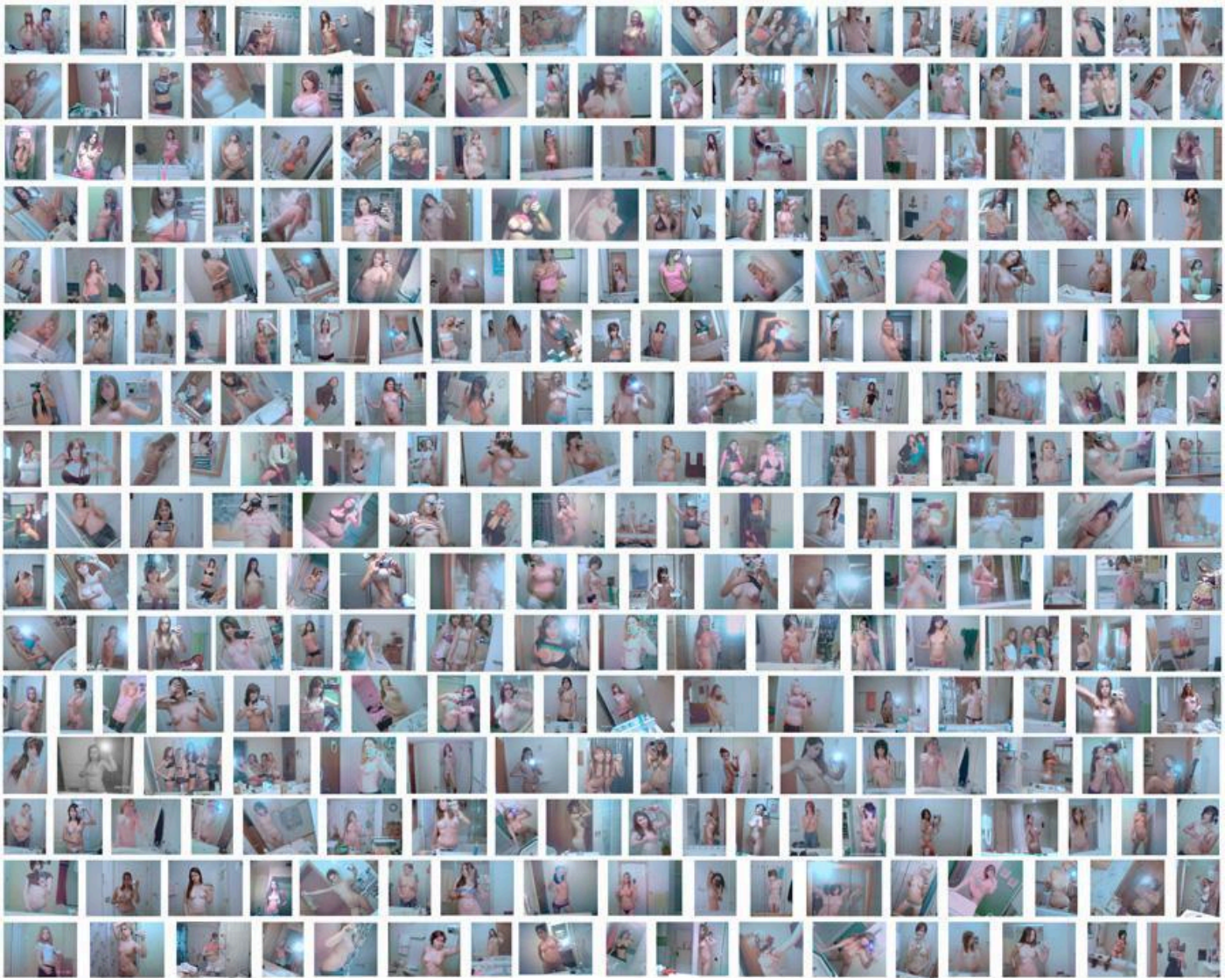
which he, with very little romantic finesse, fucks a woman. The administrative response was that it didn't "look" consensual and that it was unsafe sex because he wasn't using a condom. I'm sure the irony of that accusation isn't lost on this audience. Fortunately, unlike Leung, O'Brien was able to produce a signed model release and the installation was allowed to remain with one change – he was required to cover his doorway with a curtain and place a sign at the entrance warning viewers of the potential for offense.

Both his BFA video and *JERK OFF* are undoubtedly pornographic. And in case there is any question, pornography is still a legal form of expression. However, if it is determined that the porn is obscene, it becomes illegal and the maker is vulnerable to both a fine of \$50,000 and considerable prison time. I would say that it's unlikely this would happen to an artist with a good lawyer, but the cost of a law suit, damage to the artist's academic career, and the potential confiscation of computer and other art work, gives me great pause...

### **Daniel Dietzel – *300 Daughters***

For *300 Daughters*, Daniel Dietzel grabbed over 2500 images from a trolling website called jj.am, a website that compiles pictures found on social networking sites as well as from intercepted emails or images, released, intentionally or by accident, by the

recipients or creators. He gathered the 2500 plus images, and then sorted them for congruency.



The most prevalent theme was the self, shot in the bathroom mirror, and Dietzel found approximately 300 that fell into the category. The goal was to show an overwhelming consistency and interchangeability in what he saw as a ritualistic practice, while including images that had elements of absurdity (or irony) present in that ritual. And perhaps the most striking irony is simply contained in the title.

Looking more closely at individual images, I find myself making lots of assumptions. We all know the girls in the two images below – they are all the popular ones, but of 2 different varieties – the self-proclaimed hotties in one of their exclusive cliques on the

left, and on the right, the cute, liked-by-everyone (except maybe the girls on the left), very popular, sweet girls. But of the 300 images in this piece, the one on the right became the most profoundly sad and disturbing when I noticed the girl in the doorway.



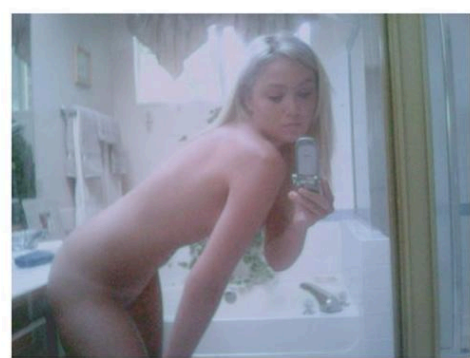
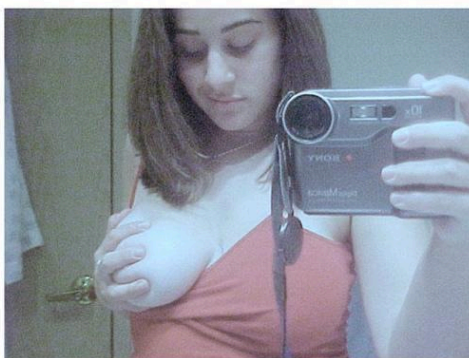
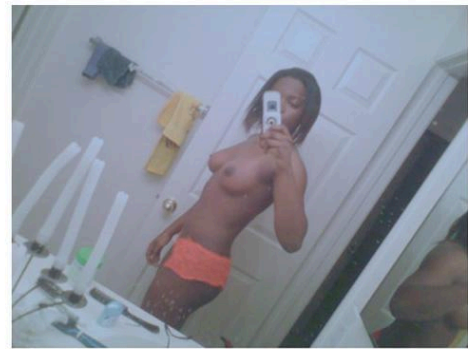
The competitive, compulsive representation of self as one of the crowd, in a crowd of friends or the crowd of every other competing self, is seen in endless iterations in the multitude of social networking sites on the Internet. What becomes both compelling and boring at the same time is the limited range of gesture, expression, and pose, undoubtedly learned from the combinatory semiotics of fashion, advertising and softcore porn.



Are these self portraits? auto-biography? Or are they simply a form of contemporary exhibitionism made possible by the ease of using sophisticated lens related technologies? A probable reason, although not the only one for this self-exclamation by teenage girls, is to record their pleasure and delight in recognizing the cultural power of their developing adult bodies. Most of the images of this oddly shameless



genre seem to be obsessed with the imperative of exposing a sexualized body and flaunting its recently acquired attributes. In this act, the girls are self-creating the objectification that second wave feminism wanted to attribute only to male exploitation.



Despite the usefulness of any intellectual and cultural analysis that could be given to this collection of 300 snapshots, the most problematic factor is of course the age of the girls and the repurposing of their images.

In the past when my students asked me if they could do something, I used to tell them, "You can do anything you want. You're living in America." It was a sarcastic remark meant to intone freedom, that there are no rules in art and they don't need to ask an authority figure what they can and can't do. That question has a different meaning now and requires more than my smug answer.

The Internet has changed the rules of the game. As part of a larger group of visual producers, artists who work with pornography (or any sexual imagery for that matter) are now being held to the same legal standards on the Internet as commercial pornographers, swinger magazines, and book sellers who may be selling materials that contain explicit images, whether such images are "pornographic" or not.

The Internet's geographic reach (and therefore, widespread possible criminal prosecution), along with the unclear distinctions between "art", "pornography" and "obscenity," run headlong into the only safe harbor artists have ever had – the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling as to the distinction between art and obscenity, and how that determination is made. When a work is called into question, artists fall into a special category that presumes the benefit of the doubt, that is, that what they produce as "artists" is "art" and may in fact not be obscene, based on the protections found in the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment. However, the Court's ruling also states that local community standards will be applied in the decision making process. Thus, citizens who may know nothing about art can determine what is obscene, and therefore illegal, in what they find on the Internet in their homes in Provo Utah, regarding works of art produced in New York, Chicago or Los Angeles.

Artists like myself and these students who do work that straddles some dangerous lines, such as the possibility of having the work considered obscene and therefore illegal, need to realize the idea of free speech does not extend to sexual images. Although anathema to any artist, there is a self-monitoring (if not a self-censorship) that now occurs, and must occur to some extent in order for artists to protect themselves from the vagaries of the "fuzzy logic" employed in the interpretation of lens-derived imagery that is sexual in nature.

I lived most of my career as an artist with a fairly cavalier attitude about the privilege I had to do and make whatever I wanted, and I encouraged my students to think that way as well. Now when my students ask me if they can do something, I tell them yes, but only if they are ready for the potential consequences in exercising their dubious first amendment right to free speech.